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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000582

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2017
TAGS: PGOV ASEC KCRM VE
SUBJECT: HOMICIDE: LIFE ON THE STREETS OF CARACAS

REF: 2007 CARACAS 02386

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Classified By: Daniel Lawton, Acting Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Venezuelan daily, "El Universal", reported on April 16 that the murder rate had risen 14% in the first trimester of 2008, despite the launch of "Safe Caracas 2008" by the Ministry of Justice in January. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV), which had been reporting plunging crime rates since Safe Caracas, called the report "media terrorism" and countered that murders had declined 8% over the same period. The former chief coroner (protect throughout) of the Caracas morgue told PolOff that the murder rate actually increased 27%. Civil society NGOs complain that criminals have learned to avoid the static police posts of Safe Caracas and argued that the BRV conceals homicide figures. End Summary.

BAD NEWS AND WORSE NEWS

¶12. (C) "El Universal", Venezuela's newspaper of record, reported on April 16 that murders during the four months of 2008 had increased 14%. The broadsheet compared the 2008 January - March figure of 710 murders with 2007's three month total of 621 homicides. (Note: For comparison purposes Los Angeles, with a population only 600,000 less than Caracas, had 122 murders from January to mid-April, up 7% from the year before. End Note.) Minister of Justice Ramon Rodriguez Chacin immediately fired back that murders had decreased 8% and accused "El Universal" of "media terrorism." PolOff visited the former chief coroner of the central morgue, Dr. Boris Bossio (protect throughout), on April 23, he said the murder rate had actually increased 27%.

PLAN CARACAS

¶13. (SBU) Shortly after being named to replace Pedro Carreno as Minister of Interior and Justice, Ramon Rodriguez Chacin assumed control of the Caracas Metropolitan Police and launched plan Safe Caracas 2008 on January 10. Using his power as Minister of Justice, Chacin assembled a 2,580 person task force from the Metropolitan Police, National Guard and neighboring police forces to surge into four blighted precincts.

NO RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS

¶14. (SBU) Within 11 days the BRV was reporting a 55% drop in crime and a 54% drop in homicides in particular. Bossio

confirmed to Poloff in January that he had seen about a 40% drop in homicides but doubted it could be sustained. By February 14, Justice Minister Chacin was boasting a 67% drop in Caracas' crime rate and 48% decrease nationwide. "El Universal's" report, claiming to use homicide figures from the Forensics Service, clocked the murder increases at 9% in January, 6% in February and a staggering 26% in March. Civil society NGOs explain that most of the police in Safe Caracas man stationary checkpoints instead of patrolling neighborhoods; although the initial deployment of police lowered crime rates, criminals quickly learned to avoid the police.

COOKING THE BOOKS

14. (C) Dr. Monica Fernandez Sanchez and Luis Cedeno (protect both throughout) of INCOSEC, a crime prevention NGO, described to Poloff how the BRV conceals the real murder rate from the public with selective statistics. None of the deaths due to police encounters (1,503 in 2006) custodial deaths in prison (512 in 2006) or unexplained deaths, "muertes dudosas", (approximately 4000 in 2006) are listed as homicides. The term unexplained death conceals a large percentage of homicides. For example, Dr. Bossio related how tenant farmers clearing land discovered two bodies in a shallow grave; these were classified as unexplained deaths. The BRV also manipulates time to hide murder statistics. When comparing weekly figures, officials only use Monday to Thursday or Friday of the current week against the seven days of the previous week. The murder rate spikes over the weekends. Bossio told Poloff that he and his staff in the Los Teques coroner's office handled 93 homicides over the weekend of April 19. Bossio explained that he had left his position as head of the metropolitan forensics unit because of increased political interference by the BRV.

15. (C) Comment: Despite high profile operations and

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equally lofty propaganda, crime is undermining public support for the BRV. Venezuelans consistently tell pollsters that either crime or food scarcity is their greatest concern. Significantly, crime is a pressing societal problem that the BRV cannot solve just by throwing money at it. With few exceptions, both the BRV and opposition parties have yet to present credible, comprehensive plans to combat urban crime. End Comment.

DUDDY